

RPG Reload Presents – The History Of Handheld RPGs, Part Seven

[March 3, 2016](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**. This week, we're continuing our little monthly project looking at the history of handheld RPGs. That means that we will not be taking a look at a specific RPG from the App Store's past this time around. Last month, we looked at the early years of mobile, pocket computers, and the RPGs that came with them. While the pickings were a bit thin early on, a great deal of the modern mobile gaming culture was born from that period. At the time, however, it proved to be very little threat to traditional handheld gaming, which was about to hit its biggest boom yet. This month, we're looking at the first and biggest part of that equation, a system that initially seemed to be a desperation move on the part of Nintendo. As we know, things turned out rather differently from what most expected.

In total, this feature will span twelve columns, each one taking a look at a specific era in handheld RPGs. I hope you enjoy reading them as much as I've enjoyed researching and writing them! Please let me know what you think by commenting below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). If you like this project and wish to support endeavors like it, please consider contributing to [the TouchArcade Patreon](#). It's what makes these kinds of big features possible.

It should go without saying that tabletop, computer, console, handheld, and mobile games are all inextricably tied with each other in various ways. To consider how other platforms contributed to handheld RPGs in these articles would grow them well beyond the scope I'm able to deal with. I'll be mentioning some influences here and there, but this is basically a disclaimer that I'm aware handheld RPGs don't exist in a vacuum, in spite of the

relatively narrow historical focus of these articles.

The History Of Handheld RPGs, Part Seven – Touch Generations

Oh, to have been a fly on the wall at Nintendo's HQ on May 13th, 2003. The Game Boy Advance was finally hitting its stride, and looked to be easily outpacing the original Game Boy's success. Every remotely dangerous competitor had bowed out of the race, the latest generation of *Pokemon* games had launched worldwide to huge sales numbers, and the recently-released Game Boy Advance SP had proven to be a smash hit. Sure, the home console business was burning, but with how strong handheld sales were, Nintendo could afford to weather a few storms in their other markets. The Game Boy Advance's momentum was such that Nintendo probably felt like they could let the handheld market coast while they tried to figure out what to do about the Gamecube and its potential successor. Whatever plans Nintendo had prepared the day before surely changed dramatically when Ken Kutaragi, the man behind the PlayStation and PlayStation 2, took the stage at Sony's pre-E3 press conference and announced his "Walkman of the 21st Century", the PlayStation Portable.

If you weren't paying attention to the hobby at the time, it's hard to accurately describe just how invincible Sony seemed at that point in time. The PlayStation 1 had broken sales records and greatly expanded the size of the video game market, pulling in a lot of customers who hadn't been all that interested in games before. Then, with the PlayStation 2, Sony effectively pointed to the bleachers and broke records yet again, this time in the face of ferocious competition from a fading SEGA, a humbled Nintendo, and a hungry Microsoft all at once. In fact, the PlayStation 2 ended up selling more than any console ever, a record it still holds to this day and appears unlikely to ever give up. So while Sony's PlayStation Portable announcement certainly had the stink of arrogance about it, people were ready to believe. Nintendo's last stronghold was about to be assaulted by its most dangerous

threat yet, and the Game Boy Advance wasn't likely to be enough to stave it off.

It's hard to tell exactly what the feeling inside Nintendo was. At the very least, they tried not to appear terribly concerned. Their actions seemed to paint a different story, however. Several months later, in November of 2003, Nintendo announced that they would be releasing a new piece of hardware in the following year, but strongly asserted that it was not a successor to either the Gamecube or the Game Boy Advance. In January of 2004, they announced a new dual-screened handheld code-named "Nintendo DS", playing up the possibilities the second screen could offer players while going out of their way to say that it was meant to be marketed separately from the Game Boy Advance. A couple of months later, a leak revealed the system's full specifications, and it certainly looked to be a lot more powerful than the Game Boy Advance. The leak also mentioned that one of the screens was a touch-capable display. Between that and the bizarre dual-screens, many gamers had trouble guessing where Nintendo was going.

The system was officially unveiled at E3 in May of 2004 to a relatively unimpressed response from media and gamers alike. A big part of that was that Sony had unveiled the PSP at their conference, showing a slick, powerful, yet rather conventional piece of hardware, supported by a wide array of big first- and third-party franchises. By comparison, the Nintendo DS prototype looked and felt clunky, and apart from an impressive-looking demo for *Metroid Prime Hunters*, the software on display wasn't terribly exciting. Sony talked specs, multimedia, and their new UMD format. Nintendo talked about innovation, expanding the gaming audience, and the irrelevance of hardware power advantages. Unlike Sony, Nintendo let attendees put their hands on the games at the show, which helped some people see the potential of the device. Ultimately, however, Sony was selling a comfortable idea to a known audience, while what Nintendo was preaching was so out there that most people saw the Nintendo DS as a confusing device cobbled together as a hasty reaction to the PSP.

We all know how this particular story ends, I'm sure. After a fairly weak launch in December of 2004, the Nintendo DS looked like it was going to be a disaster. That idea was cemented by the PSP coming out of the gates blazing. But then, something weird happened. All those things Nintendo had been talking about started to come true. People who had never played games before were drawn in by the intuitive touch interface and unique titles like *Nintendogs* and *Brain Training*. The Nintendo DS's sales skyrocketed and it never looked back. New hardware revisions like the DS Lite, DSi, and DSi XL kept the system moving, and it eventually ended up becoming the highest-selling dedicated gaming handheld of all-time, a title that it will almost certainly not relinquish in the foreseeable future. The system was particularly popular in Japan, a market where the gaming business had started to stagnate, and that meant good news for us handheld RPG fans.

The Nintendo DS hardware lent itself particularly well to RPGs. While its lack of an analog stick and relatively weak horsepower caused some issues for fast-paced 3D games, RPGs got on just fine with the directional pad and simpler graphics. Better still, the DS's signature touch controls and dual screens made a big difference for RPGs. The former made for easier menu navigation, while the latter feature allowed for maps, status screens, and other useful information to be displayed at all times. It wasn't terribly surprising that the system quickly became home to a ton of RPGs. In fact, the system ended up with so many RPGs that I can't possibly hope to list all or even most of them here. The total library of RPGs on the DS ended up somewhere above 140 games, rivaling just about any gaming hardware before or since in sheer numbers.

As with most systems, however, it took some time before a lot of RPGs arrived. I suspect there wasn't a lot of confidence in the system initially, and it wasn't until it started selling well that many third-party developers really got on board with it. While a small handful of RPGs released in Japan in the system's first full year, only a few released in English. The first, arriving in late September of 2005, was *Lunar: Dragon Song*, a new story in the popular

franchise. It was an absolutely dreadful game, not only failing to live up to the franchise but also not working well as an RPG in general. I won't go into full details as to why, but just as an example of its many bad ideas, dashing on the map caused you to lose HP, and battles only rewarded you with experience or items, not both. Fortunately, it was quickly chased by titles like *Castlevania: Dawn Of Sorrow*, *Pokemon Mystery Dungeon: Blue Rescue Team*, and *Mega Man Battle Network 5: Double Team*. Although overly-familiar in a variety of ways, they gave RPG fans something to chew on until fresh traditional fare could arrive.

November of 2005 saw the Nintendo DS's first reasonably high-quality original RPG release. *Mario & Luigi: Partners In Time* isn't regarded as fondly as some other installments in the series, but it was a solid enough RPG that had a fun story backing it. The last boss was a little ridiculous, but that's par for the course with that series. The Nintendo DS finished off its first year in a very strong market position, and by this point, many RPGs had entered development for the hot-selling device. Perhaps most important of all is that it had attracted the attention of Square Enix in a big way. The following year, would see the release of a number of games from the RPG giant, including *Children Of Mana*, a new *Dragon Quest Monsters* game, and in a major coup, a full 3D remake of *Final Fantasy 3*.

Of course, the most important Square Enix-related DS news came in December of 2006. In a move that sent shockwaves through the gaming community, the latest installment of Square Enix's *Dragon Quest* series, *Dragon Quest 9: Sentinels Of The Starry Skies*, was announced as a Nintendo DS exclusive. While not the worldwide hit that its stablemate *Final Fantasy* was, *Dragon Quest* had long been seen as a kingmaker for consoles in the Japanese market. Or rather, it was a reward that went to the king, since the series creator always preferred to put new installments on the most popular system of the time. It didn't occur to many people that those stipulations would include consideration for handheld hardware until the news actually dropped. There could not have been a clearer signal that the

Nintendo DS was Japan's gaming device of choice, and RPG developers certainly took notice.

The year 2006 would be a big one for Nintendo as far as first-party RPGs went, too. The latest generation of *Pokemon* was released in Japan late in the year. *Pokemon Diamond* and *Pokemon Pearl* wouldn't hit the rest of the world until 2007, but they were huge hits in Japan, showing that the *Pokemon* brand had the oomph for at least one more hardware generation. The games took advantage of the Nintendo DS's WiFi capabilities to allow online trades, and used the second screen for a variety of functions. You could also use the touch screen to attach accessories to your Pokemon. Many of these features were simple gimmicks, but things like touch controls for the menus made the games easier to play than ever before.

Even before the *Dragon Quest 9* announcement sent everyone scrambling, the system was attracting a lot of titles from other RPG developers of various sizes, too. Marvelous had been on-board since almost the start with their *Harvest Moon* games and spin-offs. Namco Bandai had put a team to work on a *Tales* series game, and Capcom had spun out a whole new line of *Mega Man* RPGs. One of the most significant sources of support, however, came from Atlus. Their American branch had begun picking up some of the bits and bobs from smaller Japanese publishers for US release, and they had introduced a rather interesting internally-developed series called *Trauma Center*, which put players in the role of a surgeon, with the DS stylus as their scalpel. Atlus is famously known for RPGs, however, and they had begun development on a just such a game. In a somewhat unusual turn, this game had nothing to do with their popular *Shin Megami Tensei* brand.

Etrian Odyssey released in early 2007 in Japan, following in America several months later. It's a fascinating game simply because it's such a great fusion of the new and the old. While its mechanics and overall presentation are decidedly old-school homages to *Wizardry* and its ilk, it made one special use of the Nintendo DS's features. As you navigated the first-person maze

on the top screen, you could draw a map on the bottom screen, detailing it with notes and markings as you saw fit. Games like these are always easier to handle if you're drawing maps, but not many people actually like to drag out the graph paper and pencils. *Etrian Odyssey* made map-making simple and accessible, and while it's not quite the same as having your own paper maps when it's all said and done, the player can still feel a great sense of personal ownership in their hand-drawn maps. The game performed better than expected, and for a while, you could spot RPG-loving DS owners by the tell-tale grid lines on the bottom screens of their systems. Atlus would release two more *Etrian Odyssey* games on the Nintendo DS, and the franchise is still successful and prolific to this day. It's perhaps Atlus's biggest brand outside of the *Shin Megami Tensei* series and its spin-offs.

The floodgates more or less opened in 2007, with more than 35 RPGs released in that calendar year alone. Having had major success with *Final Fantasy 3* and *Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker*, Square Enix came out to play even harder in 2007, with remakes of *Final Fantasy 4* and *Dragon Quest 4*, and sequels to *Final Fantasy 12* and *Final Fantasy Tactics Advance*. They also released a completely original title from the *Kingdom Hearts: Chain Of Memories* team called *Subarashiki Kono Sekai*, or *It's A Wonderful World*. Due to a copyright issue, the game went through a name change before its 2008 release worldwide as *The World Ends With You*, but it didn't hurt the game too badly. Although its sales were disappointing for Square Enix on the whole, the game was very well-regarded by critics and fans, and the overseas sales were a bit better than expected. It's a significant game because it truly made an effort to use all of the DS's unusual features in ways that didn't feel tacked-on. It even borrowed an idea from *Nintendogs* by allowing you to put your DS to sleep and earn special experience points by passing by other players as you were out and about. Such features would be used to great success in *Dragon Quest 9* and eventually became a core feature in Nintendo's hardware follow-up to the DS.

In 2008, the Nintendo DS hits its peak number of RPG releases, with more

than 50 new games coming from various corners of the industry. Games from franchises such as *Fire Emblem*, *Pokemon*, *Dragon Quest*, *Disgaea*, *Chrono Trigger*, *Summon Night*, and more arrived, along with a bunch of original titles. This was also the year that SEGA decided to follow in Nintendo's footsteps and release an RPG with their mascot character. *Sonic Chronicles: The Dark Brotherhood* was developed by Bioware, of all companies, and though it was intended to kick off a series, the disappointing reception from fans combined with Bioware's sale to Electronic Arts put a pin in it almost immediately. Still, it's the only handheld-native RPG made by Bioware to date, so that has to count for something, right?

The next year saw the release of *Dragon Quest 9* in Japan. With an emphasis on multiplayer and social elements like sharing maps, *Dragon Quest 9* had a very different feel from its immediate predecessor. Its creator's instincts proved correct as it soon became the highest-selling installment in the series, but it was far from the only major franchise represented. New releases for *Suikoden*, *Kingdom Hearts*, *Blue Dragon*, *Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles*, *Phantasy Star Online*, and *Valkyrie Profile* came out as well, to varying degrees of success. *Mario & Luigi* was back with *Bowser's Inside Story*, a Bowser Koopa-focused sequel that is the high mark of the series both in terms of sales and, in my opinion, quality. Atlus's *Shin Megami Tensei* series finally debuted on the console with the strategy RPG spin-off *Devil Survivor*, and a new *Might & Magic* spin-off called *Clash Of Heroes* met with a fantastic response all-around. If that weren't enough, Nintendo also released remakes of the well-regarded second generation of *Pokemon*. *Pokemon Heart Gold* and *Soul Silver* released in Japan and proved that the robust sales of the first generation remakes were no fluke. I'd also like to point out *Final Fantasy: The 4 Heroes Of Light* off in the corner. Though it wasn't well-received at the time, its follow-up *Bravely Default* scored a great hit on the Nintendo 3DS.

From 2010 on, things started cooling off for the Nintendo DS. Sales were starting to slow down, piracy was becoming rampant, and Nintendo was on

the cusp of releasing the hardware's successor. There was still some RPG life left in the machine, however. Atlus released *Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey*, which was for all intents and purposes the next mainline game in the core series. They also had a new release in the *Etrian Odyssey* series, and a fantastic one-off game called *Radiant Historia*. That game is one of the best hidden gems in the Nintendo DS RPG line-up, and if you haven't played it, you should correct that as soon as possible.

Nintendo had the next generation of *Pokemon*, *Pokemon Black* and *Pokemon White*, up their sleeves, and as a nice little surprise, the popular Game Boy Advance series *Golden Sun* got its first DS installment. Unfortunately, it didn't fare as well with a more sated audience, so *Golden Sun: Dark Dawn* is probably going to end up the last installment in the series on any platform. It ends on a cliffhanger, too. For Square Enix's part, they had *Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker 2*, a remake of *Dragon Quest 6*, an expanded port of the mobile *Kingdom Hearts* game, and a remake of *Lufia 2*. On the western front, the popular *Puzzle Quest* got a numbered sequel in the form of *Puzzle Quest 2*, though that game ended up not being anywhere near as successful as the first.

The Nintendo 3DS, successor to the Nintendo DS, released the following year in February of 2011. Support for the DS dried up surprisingly quickly after that, with only one major RPG release coming after it. *Pokemon Black 2* and *Pokemon White 2*, the "third" versions of *Pokemon Black/White*, played the RPG champion off the stage with more dignity than prior handhelds had seen. We'll be discussing the 3DS in detail in a couple of months, but while it had (and continues to have) a very strong line-up of RPGs with lots of familiar faces from the DS generation, there's no question of the impact the burgeoning smartphone market had had on dedicated handhelds. The Nintendo DS will likely end up forever being viewed as the salad days for handheld RPGs, much like the PlayStation 1 has for home console RPGs.

While its biggest contribution to the genre might have been its large, diverse

audience of owners, the Nintendo DS's popularization of touch controls had a big impact on handheld RPGs. While credit for the local multiplayer boom in the genre can be chiefly assigned to its competitor, the DS also helped introduce a number of other social features to RPGs. Things like the prototypical form of StreetPass, pedometer accessories like the PokeWalker, and online features like trading items and characters all show up in later handheld RPGs, and we can even draw some lines from these games to the modern social RPGs that occupy much of the Japanese market and mindshare in 2016. While the PSP promoted direct social gaming aspects, the Nintendo DS was fostering indirect social elements, and both would have their role to play in the genre in years to come.

Also important is that the Nintendo DS gave mid-tier Japanese developers a fairly low-cost, high-profit market to seek refuge in as development costs in the console business began to get too rich for many smaller companies' blood. Many developers and publishers have shut down in the last 10 years, but there would be far more casualties were it not for the DS. Of course, while it was the bigger part of the massive handheld RPG boom that started in the mid-2000s, there was another side to that golden era. The PSP library is jam-packed full of RPGs, and the influence of one series in particular would permanently alter the course of the genre in Japan. That's a story for next month, however, when we look at the life, death, and miraculous rebirth of Sony's first slice of humble pie, the PSP.

Shaun's Five For The Touch Generations Era

For each part of this series, I'll be selecting five notable or interesting titles to highlight. If you're looking to get a good cross-section of the era in question, these picks are a good place to start.

Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story – Bowser Koopa is one of the best characters in the Mario universe. His oafish bravado and attempts at outright

villainy contrast nicely with a noble streak that seems to run through him at times. If you've ever wanted to get his side of the story, you should play this game. He's a much more interesting protagonist than the Mario Bros., and as far as the *Mario & Luigi* series goes, this is probably the most well-balanced and enjoyable of the lot.

Radiant Historia – Hey friend, do you like JRPGs with time traveling? Of course you do. With that in mind, you should probably give this one a look-see. You're basically hopping between alternate universes, trying to find the right way to do things to reach the best ending. You'll find a lot of bad endings along the way, but you can just pop open a menu and jump back to the safest earlier node to try things a different way. This game has an interesting combat system that puts a high priority on positioning. It gets a little repetitive by the end, but it's still a pretty neat RPG overall.

Etrian Odyssey – This game is the perfect dungeon crawler for people who don't like dungeon crawlers. The opening is a bit tough, but after that it raises its challenge level so gradually, you probably won't even notice how hardcore you're becoming. That is, until you look down on your bottom screen while playing another game and see only grid lines. I give this series a huge amount of credit in reviving the turn-based first-person dungeon crawling sub-genre, particularly in Japan. It didn't do that by luck, either.

The World Ends With You – There's a really great iOS version of this game, but while its changes work out better than I had expected, there's still a lot to be said for the original version and its unique two-screen gameplay. Bouncing the "puck" between the top screen and the bottom screen is a fun challenge that helps keep the otherwise tap- and swipe-heavy gameplay from getting too boring. As an added bonus, no iOS update on Earth can break the Nintendo DS version of the game.

Dragon Quest 9: Sentinels Of The Starry Skies – *Dragon Quest 9* makes a few very strange design choices, and it rather egregiously hides a fair bit of its content behind its now-defunct online features. Even in its reduced state, however, it's a really great game. Even more so if you're playing locally with friends. It sorely needs a good remake someday, but it's still worth the trip if only to see the game that heralded the end of the home console reign in Japan.

That's all for part seven of our on-going *History Of Handheld RPGs* feature. Please let me know what you think by commenting below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). As for me, I'll be back next week with a look at *Oceanhorn* ([\\$6.99](#)). Thanks as always for reading!

Next Week's Reload: *Oceanhorn*